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Introduction: Re-storying the World

> If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then the environmental crisis is a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it. (Buell 2)

Only philosophy has the power to conceive an ecocentric ethic; yet it cannot by its own terms keep that ethic alive. Granted, the conception of an ecocentric ethic happened in an imaginatively charged 'moment' of critical reflection within the domain of philosophy, yet according to the strictest logic of that domain ecocentrism is not possible. Rather than given up all hope of such a paradigm shift, however, it worth reframing the issue. Conception of abstract concepts such as ecocentrism is one thing, gestating and birthing is another. The kingdom of philosophy will have to re-admit poets (writers and artists) to the realm to tackle those tasks. Nurturing an ecocentric ethic requires a re-imagining of ourselves and our world, a process in which storytelling - whether oral, written or filmic - excels. Storytelling has always been one of the major means that humans use to negotiate and re-create their place in the world.

Like anyone else who writes about significance contemporary issues I've had to navigate my way through the dragon's teeth of challenges arising from various postmodernist theories. Key questions must be addressed. Is it even feasible, despite the by-now obvious dangers of speaking for 'others', to create literary spaces for the subjectivities of the non-human natural world? In what partial particularities might such a quest be embodied? And who might be among the co-respondents to such a project? Spivak says that even more important than the question "Who should speak?" is the question "Who will listen?" (59). I believe both are germane.

In this essay I weave back and forth between these two questions. I explore how *science dreaming* —which I define as the linked interaction of imagination, critical reflection and encounters with one/another—is a process by which positive sociopolitical change can and does occur. This gives the context in which I set my claim that literature/storytelling is one of the strong agents of such change. My qualified answer to the question of "Who should speak?" is that it is sometimes — despite the real dangers — imperative to speak on behalf of those who would not otherwise be heard, and that it is part of a writer's responsibility to do. The critical issues of agency and advocacy are discussed, particularly in the context of the nature of storytelling and its particular powers of imagining one/another's subjectivities that make it so eminently suited to the project of moving us towards a more ecocentric world view.

Agents of Change

To begin with let me make it quite clear that I do not subscribe to the naive, modernist faith in individual imaginative genius leading us all in a progressive march towards a future of total human mastery. What is undeniable, however, is that the previously unthinkable, under the right circumstances, becomes *thinkable*. Change is therefore possible. In order to come about, however, it requires the collective to allow space for the imagining of things and states of being not currently part of the consensual reality. I would like to add, with due caution, that change *for the better* is possible. Before you drown me out with choruses of "Better according to whom?", I would submit that I do believe that, however imperfect, democracy is preferable to autocracy of any stripe, tolerance is preferable to fundamentalism of any stripe, diversity is preferable to monoculture of any stripe.

What, then, constitutes the 'right circumstances' to allow imagination to bridge the thinkable and the unthinkable? They consist of the remaining two aspects of *science dreaming*: encounters with one/another and critical reflection. The great sea journeys of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for instance, had many devastating consequences, but the encounters with difference they provided contributed greatly to the slow thawing of the god-locked, class-frozen, medieval world view that had prevailed in Europe for several centuries. Unsurprisingly, there are few contemporaneous commentators from the 'lower orders' recorded, but this rare example is telling:

> [O]ne North Italian miller [was] questioned by the Inquisition in 1548 [...] "My mind was lofty and wished for a new world," said [...] the miller, explaining that much of his disquiet came from the vision of other lands and peoples that he had absorbed from John Mandeville's tales of his travels in Africa and Cathay (Spence 18).

Earlier still, the Socratic tradition elaborated the values of critical reasoning - and the critical thinker's role as a 'gadfly', stinging society out of its complacency. Society, in the first instance, responded by swatting the original gadfly, but the forces set in motion by Socrates' commitment to the value of critical reasoning could not be stopped — and they wrought permanent changes.

Not all such changes were positive, of course. Nor should it be overlooked that the Socratic tradition was firmly rooted in an anthropocentric world view. Yet the value of critical reasoning remains a lasting legacy, made positive only when it is found together with an equal respect for imagination and encounters with one an/other. Each of these acts as a system of checks and balances for the excesses of any individual domain. Imagination requires a freedom from criticality in order to create. If it remains permanently unconstrained by the cooler demands of critical reasoning, however, it may well create travesties at best, or tragedies at worst.

Critical reasoning in the form of reflexivity is the enduring cultural value of scholarship. Yet the consequences of allowing rationality to reign unfructified by imagination or untempered by empathic encounters with others can be truly terrible. Harlow and Zimmerman's experiments with monkeys are perhaps one of the milder examples of the results in relation to the non-human natural world; the Nazi's medical

experimentation epitomise the worst extreme of the same thing in human responses to the artificially excised Other. Encounters with one/another are essential in order to recognise difference. On the other hand, if such encounters do not engage the human capacity to imagine otherness in a positive way, then the usual consequence is some form of domination. Or, if such encounters are bereft of critical reflection, then the results are either 'noble savage'/'sophisticated metropolitan' romanticism, or the rather empty and ineffective egalitarianism of liberal pluralism. Such superficiality negates the true differences of the encounter, and it is only from a genuine, empathetic, reflective engagement with one/another that positive change can emerge.

How, then, might these three forces interact in the specific context of achieving an ecocentric world view? First of all, there is the possibility of pursuing genuine encounters with one/another, not just across the intra-human divides of gender, class and ethnicity, but across all the species barriers set unnecessarily high by our current cultural constructs. Secondly, the same tool that got us into some of our current troubles could be redeployed to reason and reflect our way out of them. It is not in the least rational, for instance, to pursue a lifestyle that makes life untenable for other species, and eventually for us. And imagination is the final key that makes the unthinkable, thinkable. We should not be afraid to use it.

'*Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller*[1]

Now, it is time to take a closer look at Spivak's question: "Who should listen?" It is something that gives me considerable pause for thought when I am writing. I perceive definite limitations to environmental writing's capacity to reach those whose literacies are other than the written or techno-visual, although attempts to reach beyond such limitations were called for by Spivak:

> There is an impulse among literary critics and other kinds of intellectuals to save the masses, speak for the masses, describe the masses. On the other hand, how about attempting to learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard as bullshit. When I think of the masses, I think of a woman belonging to that 84% of women's work in India, which is unorganised peasant labour. Now if I could speak in such a way that such a person would actually listen to me and not dismiss me as yet another of those many colonial missionaries, that would embody the project of unlearning about which I've spoken recently (56).

This, of course, would be a project of great potential for political transformations. Spivak's challenge is one I hope will be taken up. In the meantime, it is important to acknowledge that the very act of writing is functionally exclusionary to many, if not most, of the world's peoples. Necessarily, therefore, in those terms environmental writing remains limited in the domain of its political ambitions; yet such ambitions clearly exist. And in another frame, the domain is broader. For instance, another way to conceive of 'the masses' is by a kind of Leopoldian extension to include microbes or granite massifs and other commonly objectified, members of the non-human natural world, for instance.

[1] This is, of course, the opening line of Walter de la Mare's poem *The Listeners*

Environmental writing is transdisciplinary work fashioned within a contemporary variation of the storytelling tradition. Although it may have specific political and ethical imperatives, literary and imaginative imperatives played at least an equal part in its formation. Jeremiads or polemics do not serve. To use my own writing as an example, I consider my relationship to natural history to be that of an amateur. The corollary to this is that the audience (those who should listen) for the kind of texts I write was conceived of as literate and interested *amateurs*, in the original sense of 'lovers'. Such an audience need not necessarily be in possession of a disciplinary speciality, but those who were would not be blinkered by their expertise, and would still be actively curious about broader fields.

Stories matter. If we do not like some of the consequences of our most powerful cultural narratives, it is no good simply ignoring them. Neither is superficial revisionism helpful. To change stories it is necessary to engage with them very deeply on their own terms, without at the same time being captured by them; that is, it is necessary to engage in some science dreaming. Only then can the delicate work of re-storying take place. I believe this has very real implications for the re*stor*ation of the environment.

Much environmental writing is designed to attract a broad variety of readers. The only common denominator of this potential community of readers is the possession of a lively interest and imagination. This is far from the lowest common denominator. Effective environmental writing does require its readers to think and feel and act. On the other hand, I would argue that environmental writers ought not exclude potential readers by allowing their prose to 'ascend' to academic obscurity or 'descend' to hectoring. For my part, I do not wish to undermine my own projects from the beginning by advertising any subversiveness on the textual surface. Nor do I wish to alienate potential co-respondents to the text by pre-empting. I see little point in just preaching to the converted. I do not wish to preach at all! Therefore, in order to restrain my predilection for taking the moral high ground, I deliberately seek counsel from intelligent readers whose politics I know to be different from my own. The aim is not to camouflage my political opinions, but to remove any irritating rhetoric. Such rhetoric would only eliminate the chance of my opinions being heard by anyone who did not already subscribe to the same ideas.

For the same reason of avoiding reader alienation, I do not wish to pursue a form that is so experimental that it would be of interest only to the academy. The comfortable traditions of storytelling suit my purposes. I want to invite as many different kinds of people as possible into a text; I want them to feel at home surrounded by the familiar, slightly shabby, narrative furniture to which most literate people are accustomed. At the same time, I am conscious of the dangers of this genre-familiarity, the sort that causes people to doze in front of a National Geographic video, lulled by the soothingly authoritative voice of the narrator, however alarming the facts or statistics he(!) is reeling off. As Conley says:

> The politics of writing, a process exercised on a local scale, is best practised when it sets itself apart from televisual information. It resists or else articulates in creatively perverse ways the manipulation of quotidian fact and reality that circulates in screened presentations of information. Distinctions have to be made between information as

> techné, which makes life possible, and that which is manipulated by ideologies for purposes of control (89).

I adamantly do not want to contribute to such manipulation. Therefore, I refused to be complicit with 'couch potatoes', who simply desire to curl up and doze on the surface of a text. So, once my imagined co-respondents are seated and relatively at ease within the narrative frame I attempt to produce a few 'double takes', to destabilise centres without losing the potential for 'dialogue'. This is the same way that stories have always changed, slowly and subtly, marked by the hands and voices they pass through (Levin; Lord).

I am haunted by the strains of *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Birkerts 1994), and know that while many fear, many others cheer at the idea that though the pen may still be mightier than the sword it is no longer a match for the image. Birkerts' book is both a paean for the art of reading in depth, and, as the title specifies, an elegy for the practice. He has observed the horizontal, depthless dominance of the multi-media image, so celebrated by some postmodernists, and sadly declared it the way of the future. Although Birkerts' text is persuasive, I am not completely convinced that depth reading is retiring to a place among the lost arts. Nor that multi-media imagery is always, by definition, depthless. Despite the almost irresistible power of this tediously-reversing dominance between text and image, I am often drawn to producing work where both are mutually eloquent to the hearts and minds of those who responded. I believe environmental writer should be accessible, but at the same time offer more to readers willing to go deeper. The next section discusses some of the two of the 'conversations' I have been party to, across the divide between reader and writer (See Conley).

Reader Response: The World Speaks Back

A caveat: I am aware, of course, that there is a marked gap between writerly intention and readerly response. This point has been quite unarguably articulated in the works of Roland Barthes (most notably "Death of the Author"). Once any writing moves into published discourse is impossible to be privy to most of the ensuing 'conversations' (internal or public) generated by the text. A marked gap is not, however, to be conflated with an unbridgeable gulf. I do not wish to reinflate the monstrously egotistical figure of 'The Author'. On the contrary, as a storyteller and a woman, I feel that I have never lost contact with the traditions running through me. Multiplicity and the intertextual process of co-creation are home territory. As Levin said of story singers in his introduction to Alfred B. Lords *Singer of Tales* "the act of composition [...] is at once a transmission and a creation". The same seems true to me of writing stories. In this context I contend that communication between writer and reader is not without reciprocity and mutual understanding. How could I believe otherwise, given my commitment to writing as a political as well as imaginative praxis? It is my habit, therefore, to ask a wide variety of people to read my manuscripts, in part or in full, and comment on them - as either an 'expert' or as a 'general reader', or both. As well as deepening the accuracy of the text, and broadening the tolerance and tolerability of its prose style, the ensuing feedback not infrequently provided anecdotal evidence of exactly the sort of responses I had hoped to evoke. What follows are two readers'

comments, the first pertinent to the question 'Why should we remember?', the second to the question 'Who should speak?'.

Lest We Forget

"I had never thought about it before - it had simply never occurred to me - but all the bush places I played in as a child have disappeared, too. And I am only 25 years old."

Salleh says "Given the escalating plunder and misappropriation of natural and 'human' resources that passes for 'productivity,' it is not more 'reason' that is required but less: the analytic blade has wrought enough destruction. What is apposite to the human condition at this point in time is 'remembrance' "(137). In this case, it is not only the larger project of 'remembering' what Snyder calls 'past inhabitary practices' (see Murphy 150-1). I was precisely hoping that my process of re-membrance in writing would act as a stimulus for many another's memories of what has happened/is happening in their time, in their place. I wanted to encourage the disruption of synchronic torpor, with a bit of diachronic digging. It is the work of a storyteller to keep history alive in order to ensure that the future is lively. Or, as Benjamin puts it "The storyteller takes what [she] tells from experience - [her own] or that reported by others. And [she] in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to [her] tale" (87). One of my favourite responses, therefore, came from a sister storyteller. She simply said "Thank you for giving me back my home place". By which she meant both a reanimation of the childhood landscapes that had been important to her, and, an extended knowledge of the history of her locus in a broader sense.

Stone Voices

I know the dangers attendant on speaking for others have been thoroughly analysed (Spivak is just one of many such analysts); patronisation is perhaps the least part of the power plays that can flow from the practice. For all its real and potential abuses, however, I cannot help but feel that there are circumstances in which *failure* to speak on behalf of that, or those, currently or even permanently powerless to speak on their own behalf/s is a massive abnegation of moral responsibility. Political prisoners, abused children, people with severe disabilities and the entirety of the non-human natural world are cases in point.

Between the familiar dangers of patronising the not-quite-knowable other and the lunacy of 'channelling' them, there remains the slim, but enduring possibility of advocacy. I agree with Plumwood's conclusion that "There are some crucial differences between the speaking position of those who speak for nature and other kinds of liberation speech, but they are not such as to completely invalidate the model"(349). It seems obvious to me that the dangers inherent in speaking on behalf of the other are greatest where the power differential is highest. Co-existing with the well-documented human history of power-over politics, however, has been an equally robust resistance to power: the Greeks' golden mean, the Christian precept of loving your neighbour as yourself, the Buddhist counsels of compassion for all, a completely secular reverence for life processes are some of the more well known. The success of these resistant

cultural strains is to be measured by their endurance, rather than their obvious failure to completely eradicate the counterforces of domination and abuse. Less well documented, perhaps, are the strategies of countless indigenous cultures, where the continuity *and* contingency of human life is more obviously shared with the non-human natural world, and the power-differential is low.

Dave Foreman has taken up one such model, following Paula Underwood Spencer's rendering of the Oneida Indian story "Who Speaks for Wolf?" (Foreman, cited in Bookchin, 48-49). This is the story of a tribe that had grown to the point where it needed new territory for some of the people. The chosen place, however, turned out to be the home of a large wolf community. The people gave the matter much consideration in their Councils. They decided that the option of exterminating the wolves was incompatible with their own notions of themselves as honourable people, so they had to find a way to live with them. Finally, they appointed someone to represent the interests of the non-human natural world, as personified by Wolf. At all future Councils, the question was asked, "Who speaks for Wolf?" This was not a formulaic salve. The responses carried great weight in the decision making process.

Thus, we are not without positive models for speaking-on-behalf-of. In what ways, then, might cultures somewhat more estranged in their relations to the non-human natural world learn how to listen carefully enough to create genuine advocacy? In line with Murphy, "I would argue that, like the unconscious, the nonhuman also articulates itself by means of various 'dialects,' and that neither requires volition to do so" (11). It may be an act of ventriloquism by vested interests to give voice to these others, within certain frameworks, but is it necessarily so in every instance? In what ways might it be possible to re-cognise 'the subjectivities and potential agencies of the non-human natural world.'? How can we know what 'they' want when 'the masses' to which I refer above cannot literally speak?

Let us take an apparently obvious example: recognition of the rights of passage of migratory birds, say, or Western Swamp Tortoises, or Mountain Pygmy Possums, *et al*. Some might come to this insight into the needs of other animals through indigenous wisdom, based on oral traditions, close observation and immediately obvious interconnecting survival needs related to hunting. Some might come to it through population modelling in ecology. Some might come to it through a meditative recognition of the less immediately obvious interconnecting psychic survival needs of humans and our planetary cohabitants. One method is not 'better' than the other, nor are they mutually exclusive: they all provide a basis for making ethical decisions about respect for 'anotherness'; they all provide ways to enter into mutually forming 'conversations' with the subjectivities of the non-human natural world. Natural scientists interpret these 'messages from home' all the time when they collect data on the relative health or illness of species and ecosystems. We, too, could adopt the suggestions of Christopher Stone and make room in our legal councils for advocacy of the non-human natural world.

Above all, it must be acknowledged that high power differentials and fixed hierarchies are traditionally features of a patriarchal world view. This kind of top-down, militarist-bureaucratic outlook is evidently harmful to all women, most men and the entire non-human natural world. Within the kind of ecofeminist paradigm outlined by Murphy,

however, "relation [could be] the primary mode of human-human and human-nature interaction without conflating difference, particularity and other specificities [one that] worked from a concept of relational difference and *anotherness* rather than Otherness [...]" (35). In this way, it is possible to conceive of 'speaking with' rather than 'speaking for' the non-human natural world. These 'conversations' can be carried on through literary, scientific, artistic, meditational or other interfaces. As Haraway says:

> A corollary of the insistence that ethics and politics covertly or overtly provide the bases for objectivity in the sciences as a heterogeneous whole, and not just in the social sciences, is granting the status of agent/actor to the 'objects' of the world. Actors come in many and wonderful forms. Accounts of a 'real' world do not, then, depend on a logic of 'discovery', but on a power-charged social relation of 'conversation'. The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder (198).

A "master decoder" is a disembodied and naturalised totalitarian, a good example of which is the purported 'objectivity' of naive empiricism. There is no such thing as an 'innocent' ecocentric, but to recognise our partial subjectivity is to open up the possibility of communicating among differing subjectivities - of encountering one/another.

In my writing I attempt to open up such dialogues by decoding across at least two important interfaces. One of them is the task of moving discourses from the academy to the wider community. Cuomo asserts that one aspect of ecofeminist praxis (along with lobbying, direct actions and other forms of activism) is moving ecofeminist discourses from the academy into the wider community. She does not posit an academic-real world binary that privileges the latter; rather she wishes to awaken us to the possibilities of praxis as a form of theory and theory as a form of praxis - both of which invigorate each other. The political/ethical discourse of ecofeminism, therefore, frames and infuses the practice of my writing. So, too, does the productive but problematic discursive field of post?colonialism. Another was offering myself as a "thing-for-others, in the way that Gary Snyder, for instance, would define his obligation as a poet to let other aspects of the world speak through him in poetry" (Murphy 146). This is not to be conflated with the pseudo-omniscience of the "master decoder".

What *petit recits* answers to this grand narrative? What patchwork of little, local stories can re-weave the world? Perhaps this is work for a local letter writer? A middle-aged woman, say, located in a specific, non-metropolitan, market place or bus station, offering her services to facilitate dialogue among the polyglot throng, of varying literacies, and their far-flung interdependent others? No, even that metaphor is too detached. What is needed is somebody who is an active participant in the dialogue, someone who genuinely sends their own love to your second cousin, O.S., as well as bringing you unexpected messages from distant relatives of different species you didn't even know you had. Perhaps that is a job for ecofeminist writers and poets:

> The idea is that poetry — perhaps because of its rhythmic and mnemonic intensity — is an especially efficient system for recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community (247).

Conclusion

Despite the mesmerising plausibility of postmodern theorists, feminists have to look behind the light of such theory to the shadow it casts. It is not only naive, unreconstructed modernists that believe positive sociopolitical change in the body politic of the 'real world' is possible. Feminists have good reason to believe in such a possibility - they are the inheritors of the positive changes their foremothers and sisters believed in and fought for at such great cost. *Eco*feminists have good and urgent reasons to believe that the recognition of shared mechanism of oppression is a vital way to contribute to the ongoing process of liberating all of nature, human and non-human. As part of this process, re-imaginings must take place in all the discourses available to us. The discourse of storytelling excels in the imaginings of other subjectivities, generally (but not exclusively) human ones. Reconstructing the imagined subjectivities of the non-human natural world is a way in which writers can contribute to the development of an ecocentric ethic and, therefore, literature can be a valid and effective agent of change.

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